Ending Elder Isolation, Creating Connections

FriendshipWorks

INTERGENERATIONAL STORYTELLING GROUP

LGBTQ

A book of memories and possibilities
Dear friends,

Since 1984, FriendshipWorks has pursued its mission of reducing social isolation, enhancing quality of life, and preserving the dignity of older adults in Boston by matching elders and volunteers for weekly visits, medical escorts, short-term projects, and arts-based group work.

Many factors can contribute to an older adult becoming socially isolated. LGBTQ elders are at a higher risk for social isolation than the general population and because today’s LGBTQ seniors were “molded under conditions of intense homophobia”¹ they may be less likely to reach out for help.

LGBTQ elders are “twice as likely to live alone, twice as likely to be single, and 3 to 4 times less likely to have children”; combined with a higher rate of estrangement from families-of-origin, this means that social isolation affects LGBTQ elders in “unique and disproportionate ways.”²

In the spring of 2018, we piloted an 8-week LGBTQ Intergenerational Storytelling Group with the guiding hypothesis that social isolation manifests in unique ways within LGBTQ communities, and that stimulating multi-generational connection through artistic expression is a way of creating change and building resilience.

We have created this book as a record of that group’s time together, as well as a vision document for what multi-generational programming, storytelling work, and LGBTQ-specific initiatives may look like in the future. We are sincerely grateful for all who participated in the group—who shared their time, energy and heart to make this work possible. We are honored to share in their journey!

Yours,

Janet Seckel-Cerrotti, Executive Director
Ben Freeman, Facilitator

This week we set expectations for our time together and explored the meanings of our names - their etymology and what they mean to us personally.

We shared nicknames that we’ve had over the course of our lives, names that we’ve chosen and why. We wrote acrostic poems about our names or continued conversation in small groups.

Here are some of the expectations that we set together:

- Ask questions with kindness, answer with honesty.
- Be courageous, even in discomfort.
- Park patriarchy at the door.
- Bring curiosity, not judgment.
- We respect one another. We listen to one another intently.
- Be patient with others and yourself.

“A story is the shortest distance between two people.”

- Pat Speight

- Margaret C. Hughes
This week we brought in photographs and objects that represent family to us, both families we’re born into and families we’ve chosen.

This week we heard stories about:

- Two families living in the same Massachusetts town for 300 years, joined in marriage for the first time by two men
- A bowl as a representation of family - “a vessel that can hold many kinds of relationship”
- The first Pride parade in New York City, where everyone had a piece of the same cake
- Finding community all over the world, collecting family as we live even when our born family is estranged
- Putting pieces of ourselves together
- Wisdom that lives in the body, wisdom that transcends what the mind knows
- A first trip outside of the country, cathedrals that take our breath away

“There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories.”  
- Ursula K. LeGuin
This week we continued our explorations of where we come from and where we’re going by diving into questions of “a life’s work” - not only career, but raising families, fighting for justice, coming into a fuller relationship with ourselves and others.

We read a poem called “Where I’m From” by George Ella Lyon and an excerpt from a book by Edmund de Waal about the hidden lives of objects. We explored connections between what we wanted to be when we grew up, the things we need to do our jobs, and kinds of work that sustain us, writing our own pieces in response.

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“Would I have been able to make the same choices that my forebears did?”

“Stories can conquer fear, you know. They can make the heart larger.”  
- Ben Okri

“What is my heart’s work?
To comfort, to feed, to bind up, to warm.

What vessel will carry me to that work?
I’ve torn up my ticket to the conventional conveyance.

My brains’ mended skiff can help
But what is the land to which I must sail?

Because I must if I am to die as me
And not some half-formed could-have-been.

I am open to suggestion.”

-Priscilla Ballou
HOW DO YOU SEE YOUR BODY?
“Sometimes critically. Sometimes compassionately. With lots of appreciation and gratitude.”

“I appreciate my body for the things it does. Once I hiked 200+ miles on the Appalachian Trail and it is really cool to think my body, my feet did that.”

“It’s been my enemy, a victim, a burden, but also a friend, a lover, a teacher.”

HOW DO OTHERS SEE YOUR BODY?
“I am ALWAYS wondering whether people can read me as gay!!”

“We don’t really know, so sometimes that causes anxiety.”

“I am so often aware that mainstream culture sees me as ugly. I am working on fighting against that.”

WHAT MAKES YOU FEEL PRESENT IN YOUR BODY?
“Walking is my favorite meditative state! Definitely what I do when I need to process.”

“Was for me [a way to process] when I walked more easily. I miss that.”

“I am most present with activities engaging all my senses.”

This week we were caught in a Nor’Easter! After drying off, we spent our time breathing, stretching, doing a guided “Body Scan” meditation, and using markers and chart paper to have a visual discussion about the things that make us feel present in and far from our bodies, the way our own perceptions of our bodies have changed over time, and the way others’ perceptions of our bodies have changed over time.

“Looking back together, telling our stories to one another, we learn how to be on our own.”
- Lois Lowry
WEEK 5: LOVE

This week we talked about the great love stories of our lives. We heard stories about numbers exchanged on a train after an in-depth discussion of favorite authors, learning through challenge and heartache about differences between romance and sex. We noted that not all love occurs in relationship, the way love sometimes finds its root in inspiration or admiration; we thought about love that sticks, love that never is, love that stays for a season.

After our session, we took a trip to Priscilla’s favorite dim sum restaurant in Chinatown! Here are some pictures from our lunch.

“Stories are a communal currency of humanity.”
- Tahir Shah
This week we listened to a playlist of our favorite songs as we clipped images from fashion magazines and outer space calendars and pasted them in collages, representing our meditations on love or the pieces of art that have meant the most to us in our lives.

Here are the songs that we chose for our time together:

- All of Me - Billie Holiday
- Stones in the River - Carrie Newcomer
- Lost - Michael Buble
- Cold War - Janelle Monae
- Send in the Clowns - Judy Collins
- Union Maid - Pete Seeger
- All the Way Down - Kelela
- You Don’t Own Me - Lesley Gore
- Know Your Onion! - The Shins

“Where words fail, music speaks.”
- Hans Christian Andersen
WEEK 7: LOSS

This week we began by looking silently at our collage pieces, naming the images and phrases that stood out to us. Next, we began our contemplation of loss with lovingkindness meditation, cultivating compassion for others and ourselves before moving into writing time. In our writing and subsequent discussions we explored how we move through or adapt to experiences of loss: what places we go, what rituals we enact, what words and images we turn to. We explored what helps us to remember or honor or live with loss, whether there is a purpose to it, what loss teaches us about being alive.

We closed by reading Mary Oliver’s poem “Bone”:

“Truly I know
Our part is not knowing,
But looking, and touching, and loving,
Which is the way I walked on,
Softly,
Through the pale-pink morning light.”

- Sheila Estelle “Essie” Record-Stanley

“[In the days following my grandmother’s death] We flew home early, and my mom stared out the window the whole time. My Jewish grandparents babysat me through the wake, and I briefly met my mother’s estranged siblings at her mother’s project apartment on Ave D & 10th Ave, where the walls had crucifixes and the sofas were covered in plastic. A few years later, I broke the tusk off a white elephant statue in our living room, and my mom yelled at me and tried to Krazy Glue it. It was her mom’s.”

-Alexa Herlands

“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.” - Maya Angelou

Lovingkindness Meditation

A Buddhist practice

Focusing first on breath and the sensations around the solar plexus/heart center, we cultivate compassion for ourselves, those close to us, those we feel indifferent to or have no personal relationship with, and those with whom our hearts are not at rest. Traditional lovingkindness meditation closes by cultivating compassion for all beings. In each step we repeat these phrases:

May I/you/all beings be happy.
May I/you/all beings be healthy.
May I/you/all beings be safe.
May I/you/all beings be loved.
May I/you/all beings live with ease.
In our final session, we discussed assumptions that others make about us because of our age and proposed “other sides to the story” that we wanted others to know. We had a visual discussion on chart paper about what we believe (in), how we make meaning, and what meanings we are taking away from this group.

After completing a final evaluation, we discussed the future of intergenerational, LGBTQ-specific, and storytelling programming at FriendshipWorks and took a moment to express our gratitude to one another before leaving.

“Stories...serve as a string that binds one heart to another. (And I believe that the universe is made up of string.)”

- Peninnah Schram

What do you believe (in)?

“The search for meaning itself, not being afraid of change, and doing things together!”

“Pain produces connection, if we’re honest about ours and will listen to others’.”

“The essential goodness of human beings - no matter how buried...belief can imply work.”

How do you make meaning?

“Stories! Listening to and telling.”

“Take time to be with other people, accept them on their own terms insofar as you can. The best times/ideas/practices are always shared - and everyone has wisdom to give.”

“I try to shake things up now and then. I need regular habits but they can get in the way.”

What meaning(s) are you taking away from this group?

“I’ve still got it. I’m not fading away.”

“Sometimes queer community is discovered in places I haven’t thought to look.”

“Age is so far from the most important way to see and understand others.”
FriendshipWorks

If you would like to get in touch, learn more, or partner with FriendshipWorks, contact

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